10: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

THE KARENS OF BURMA

I

BACKGROUND

101 175 THE Karen people of Burma are now the second most important tribe in the country; but one hundred years ago they were called by their more powerful Burman neighbours the "Wild Cattle of the Hills".

At that time they were unorganized and lived in the dense forests that covered the country, especially in the ranges of hills that afforded them protection. They had no written language and were held in bondage to the fears that made their lives stagnant and prevented their changing the customs that they had received from their ancestors.

181 131 361 563 ● 186 They were not an aggressive people and sought security in withdrawal from the rivers, which in those days were the only lines of communication, and they built their small villages high up in the hills or other places difficult of access. Here they lived in poverty but not without hope that some day their descendants would have better times. But now like hunted birds they admonished their children as they squatted at their rude low tables to eat their rice, "Eat fast, eat fast. The Burmans may come!"

173 171 Their origin is obscure. They have no written records and the destructive wet climate has obliterated almost all

The generations through which they have been exploited by their more powerful neighbours have left a stamp upon them and even educated men and women often allow themselves to be outdone in office and shop simply because they dislike to evoke contention. Often the faithful work of an individual does not bring the proper credit to the one earning it, for another steps in and takes advantage of his reticence to claim honour which he does not deserve.

In the old days retaliation for the exploitation they underwent at the hands of the Burmans would be taken by their striking back whenever they saw an opportunity. Small parties of Burmans who were caught in the Karen hills seldom returned alive. It was not because the Karens were worse than others or more given to atrocities, but simply that to them it was a way of getting what they thought was justice.

In their original condition they not only made forays against other races but were continually at feuds among themselves. The theft of a buffalo or a bronze drum, or the kidnapping of a child or a slave, was occasion for a foray. These usually went on and continued from bad to worse until villages were destroyed and many lives were lost. There were no other courts of justice.

The Karens felt the lack of the Book, as they called the Bible,—a need that contributed to what we now would call an inferiority complex. But like all people, either individuals or nations, that have an inferiority complex they were ready and waiting to be led out into greater freedom. They hailed the coming of the American Baptist missionaries as those who could help them to find themselves, to get their rights and to free themselves from the thraldoms into which they were conscious that they had

10: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

177 them a language that might denationalize them. But
181 when they sought outside teachers who would instruct
797 them in English, the missionaries agreed to carry on schools in that language, and there grew up the Anglo-Vernacular system (English combined with the vernaculars, Burmese and Karen) that reached up to the
153 University with its degrees. Karen students usually are
871 slower to grasp new ideas than Burmans, but they often retain them better and have been, in proportion to their numbers, just as good students as any other race in the country. When they get over their reticence and fears they seem to be able to succeed in any endeavour for which they have the aptitude.

● 186 The Karens are often accused of being clannish. They
582 are, but it is their natural self-interest which leads them to cling to each other for protection from their more powerful neighbours. For the same reason they condemn marriage outside the tribe.

181 Although physically the Karen seems to an outsider
152 closely to resemble the Burman, he has many very
101 different racial characteristics which make it difficult for the two peoples to understand each other. The Burman is much like his own national emblem, the peacock, given to show and to a great appreciation of fine feathers. He likes to do things quickly and not too thoroughly. He watches those whom he desires to please and caters to their tastes. He uses many honorifics and is diplomatic in his language and manner. He often wears a silk *longyi* of dainty colours over a body that is rough and unwashed.

The Karen wears his dirty clothes over his unwashed person and feels that the two go together. He cares nothing for personal appearance. He is abrupt in his

10: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

621 the chief, often his own relatives, would remain in the village. This refers to those sections where the Karens were left to themselves.

621 177 Under the settled conditions brought about by the British Government things remained about the same. The headman was recognized as the seat of authority by the Government, but still the Karens themselves retained their own independent spirit and followed him only by consent. However, since it has required the permission of the Government to set up a new village site, there has been less splitting of villages. In some cases there has been a revival of the old Burmese office of *Taikh-thugyi* or Collector of Revenue for a section comprising several villages. In such cases the local headman has been relieved of the collection of the taxes in the area.

563 663 ● 186 The exploitation of the Karens by the Burmans in the days of Burmese rule was chiefly by the forcing of unrequited labour in building walls, digging canals, etc., and the general rough treatment they received when they ventured into the towns. They were shown to be unwelcome by having the dogs set upon them. Such treatment resulted in a great deal of racial antagonism on the part of the Karens towards their more powerful neighbours. This prevented closer relations between the villages which were located in the same section. It made the Karens more exclusive, keeping them within their own tribe, and causing them to refuse to mix with the Burmans.

621 177 However, under British rule, and with the greater protection that has come to the Karens from it, the Government has established village tracts which comprise several hamlets under one headman. In such cases the Karens

10; Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

have come under the Burman official and formed a single unit in his jurisdiction, and on the whole have received just treatment. In some cases, a Karen of standing and influence has been chosen as the headman and has had Burmese villages under his control. In this way Karens have risen to power over those who formerly looked down upon them.

There has usually been a strong national self-consciousness among the Karens. They long for the freedom which they feel would come if they had a Karen king and were out from under the rule of the Burmese and even, in a small degree, of the British. The "prophets" who have led various revival movements among them have had something of a combined political and spiritual freedom in mind although the former has been kept more or less camouflaged. One of those, who seemed to be a sort of Quisling before the Japanese invasion, was talking about the coming of a Karen king to take over the country. But those who heeded him were only a small handful of the more primitive Karens in the Toungoo Hills and those in some of the more remote parts of the Irrawaddy Delta.

[276]

Pipe

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

CHAPTER XIX

MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

584 582 In the early days it appears that a young man did not marry until he was twenty-five or thirty years of age. His parents, deciding that it was about time for him to have a wife, either arranged with the parents of some maiden or, as was more often the case, confided in some friendly elder and entrusted the matter to him. If they had a preference, they made it known; but not infrequently the mediator was permitted to select whomsoever he might think best. It made no difference whether the young persons had ever met or not. When the subject was broached to them, they usually consented; but if they refused, as they seem to have done sometimes, the proposed arrangement was dropped. The mediator in such an affair was known as the "t' lo pa."

582 186 621 Up to a generation or two ago marriage between a Karen and a member of another race was altogether tabu. This explains why the Karen have maintained their traditions and their social solidarity to so remarkable a degree. Moreover, it was an almost invariable rule among the Karen that the young woman should belong to the same tribe as the youth. Even to this day one who marries into another tribe is looked at a little askance and is spoken of as having married outside ("pgha htaw leu hko"). It was not uncommon for relatives, usually second or third cousins, to wed. First cousins very rarely married. In Shewegyin if a girl was a relative of the man, she must belong to his generation, that is, they must be first, second, or third cousins, as the case might be. She might be an inhabitant of the same village as her spouse or of another. While it was more common for the parents of the young man to begin the negotiations for a wedding, it was not a rare occurrence for the parents of a girl of marriageable age to begin them.

584 582 Child betrothals were not uncommon in the early days. Two families, who were on very intimate terms and desirous of prolonging their intimacy indefinitely, would arrange to have their children marry. Even young couples, who as yet had no children, would agree that, if favored by fortune, a marriage should take place be-

Lib Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1922 APT Burma
Karen APT

served their tabus they prospered, but when they neglected them they suffered adversity, it is alleged.

Marriage of a Karen with a person of another race was formerly strictly forbidden. This exclusiveness kept the racial stock pure and unmixed. In recent times the prohibition has not been rigorously enforced. Hence, the barriers between the Karen on the one hand and the Burmese and Shan on the other have been somewhat weakened, betokening—it must be confessed—a moral looseness that was unknown before. The village elders have always maintained that marriages outside of the tribe ("taw leu hko") were not good, although such unions have not been lately tabued. Marriages between members of the same tribe or of the same village, providing the parties concerned are not more closely related than cousins, are permitted. To marry a relative closer than a cousin would be incest, and all the tribes forbid such unions. On the day of a wedding in a village the inhabitants are forbidden to labor.

Adultery and fornication are under strict tabu, except in the Red Karen tribe,[1] the belief among the other tribes being that these sins are offensive to the "Bgha" [2] and destroy the productiveness of the fields, the "Lords of the earth" withholding their favor from the crops when they find that such deeds have been committed. In making their annual feast to these deities, the Bwe tribe formerly required those who had been guilty of uncleanness during the year to confess their sins and did not permit them to come near the sacrificial altars.

A number of prohibitions are connected with birth. One of the Sgaw precepts forbids pregnant women to eat the flesh of the curious monkey-tiger *(Ictides ater)*, bitter herbs, and the long smooth pod called alligator's tongue. Before the men adopted the modern fashion of wearing their hair short, the husband of a woman who was with child was not permitted to trim his locks, for fear of shortening the life of his expected offspring. During the first six days following a birth the custom of the Paduang denies to the father the right of associating or even speaking with any one, except his own family. He alone cares for the mother and child during the period named.[4] The purpose of thus secluding the father is to prevent the transmission of the danger and weakness

[1] See Dr. Mason's account in the *Journal, Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1866.

[2] This is true in those localities where the "Bgha" are regarded as the family protectors. In other localities, as among the Bwe, the effectual powers were the "lords of the earth."

[4] Lieutenant R. W. Cardale, *Report on Bwe Expedition*, 1894-95, p. 33.

[3] E. B. Cross, J. A. O. S. (1854) Vol. IV, 339, 2; and R. C. Gilmore, Journ. Burma